

RIVER *of* CONCERN

STORY BY SAM BLACKWELL | SOUTHEAST MISSOURIAN

NEW MADRID, Mo.

For 15 years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been planning to close a gap in the levee system at New Madrid that allows the Mississippi River to flood thousands of acres of farmland.

The corps claims the \$80 million St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project is necessary to protect the livelihoods of largely agricultural New Madrid, Mississippi and Scott counties. Environmental groups and some agencies that manage the state's resources have been concerned that the plan will destroy huge amounts of wildlife habitat and wetlands and threaten a state park.

"It's a massive insult to the environment," says Dr. Susan Flader, president of the Missouri Parks Association.

For weeks last May, Pinhook, Mo., farmer Jim Robinson's tractor pulled a trailer loaded with children so they could get to and from school. Robinson, whose crops often flood, is not so worried about how the project might affect birds and fish.



Levee project

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project could close a 1,500-foot gap between levees at New Madrid, Mo., preventing the Mississippi River from back flooding Big Oak Tree State Park and low-lying communities such as Pinhook, Mo.

"I'm concerned about people," he said.

Water in the basin

According to the corps, flooding last May occurred on 77,400 acres in the St. Johns Basin and New Madrid Floodway. The basin is a broad area

extending west from the Mississippi River to the headwaters near the cities of Sikeston, Charleston and East Prairie, Mo. The floodway below the bayou carries backwater from the Mississippi.

History of Bootheel levee system

The federal levee system up and down the Mississippi was built in reaction to the devastating flood of 1927, when local levees were all that saved many people from drowning. Many lived on the levees for months. Commerce secretary Herbert Hoover's championing of the levee project positioned him to win the presidency.

The New Madrid Floodway was built to keep Cairo, Ill., from flooding. The gap between the levees was maintained because a similar closure made in the St. Johns Bayou caused concern, according to Eddie Belk, deputy for project management for the Memphis District Corps of Engineers.

"It took a long time for the internal drainage to evacuate, and they thought maybe they were better off taking chances with the river," he said.

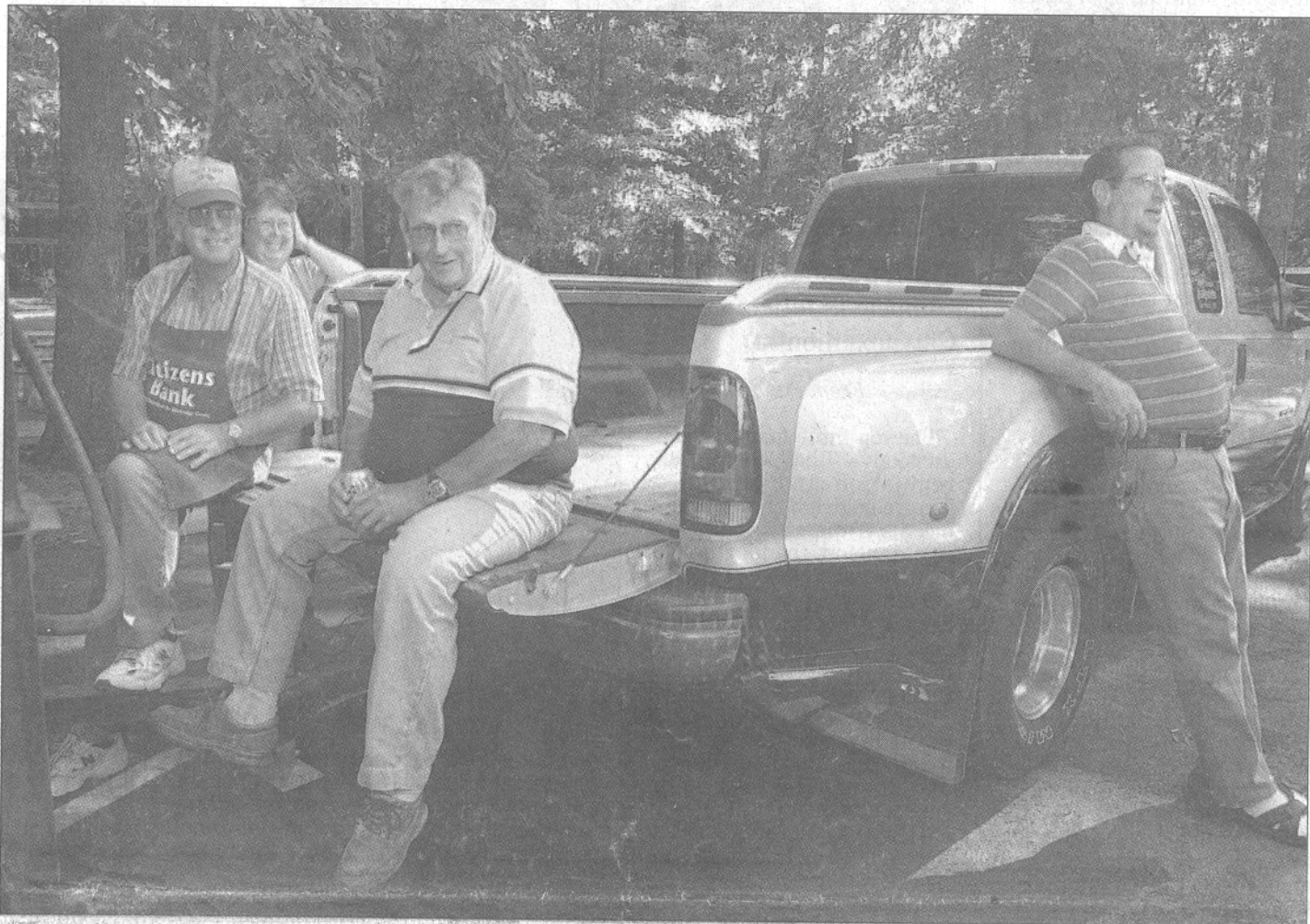
The corps has studied how flood levels would be affected at communities above the gap. "The closure will have almost immeasurably small impacts upstream," Belk said.

The Flood Control Act of 1954 authorized closure of the gap, and the St. Johns Bayou improvements were approved in 1986. Opposition from environmental groups and agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Department of Natural Resources slowed the project.

— Sam Blackwell

LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

The St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project is pitting Bootheel residents who battle floodwaters annually against environmentalists who say vital wetlands will be destroyed and species displaced. The matter could be decided in the courts.



Southeast Missourian/Christine Johnson

Sid Drummond, Toni Russell, Bill Dunn and Dale Harrell swapped jokes and stories before a James Bayou Cookers' fish fry Thursday in Big Oak Tree State Park. The four residents of East Prairie support the St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project, which they say will help the park and area farms.

Levee proposal creates animosity along the Mississippi River.

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Nearly 49,000 acres of crops were lost in the basin in May due to flooding, the corps says.

The corps claims the region will derive an annual economic benefit of about \$855,000 more than the cost of maintaining the project, most of it from avoiding flood damage.

Construction of a new levee that would close a 1,500-foot gap between two existing levees just above New Madrid is the primary component of the project. The plan also would require putting a pumping station on both St. Johns Bayou and the adjacent New Madrid Floodway to evacuate interior flooding. Finally, it calls for deepening drainage ditches and steams over 27.6 miles of St. Johns Bayou.

The corps released the final environmental impact statement on the project Friday. After 30 days of comment and pending water-quality certification from the state, the project can move ahead. An appropriation from Congress would be sought in the next fiscal year.

No environmental opposition has arisen in the three counties affected. However, some environmentalists say they wouldn't be surprised if the courts end up making decisions about the project.

Big Oak Tree concerns

One concern is the effects the project could have on Big Oak Tree State Park north of New Madrid. In years when both the Mississippi and Ohio rivers flood, the 1,000-acre park has been inundated by back flooding, sometimes from different directions. As a result, trees that are shade and water tolerant have thrived and have kept burr oaks from regrowing.



"It's almost a matter of too little too late."

— Denise Dowling, superintendent at Big Oak Tree State Park

flooding.

The corps maintains the park is threatened unless the flooding that has been inundating the stand of trees is prevented. Everyone agrees that something must be done if the park is to be saved.

"It's almost a matter of too little too late," says Denise Dowling, superintendent at the park.

The park historically has flooded, but more recent floods have been deeper and have stayed longer, an effect many attribute to the increasing channelization of the river. The state Department of Natural Resources has proposed a plan of building levees around the park and digging wells to return it to historical flood levels. In the final impact statement, the corps states its commitment to the plan.

But Flader, a history professor at the University of Missouri, says it does not address concerns about the water quality at the park due to the use of chemicals on nearby crops.

Members of the James Bayou Cookers were at Big Oak Tree State Park Thursday for a catfish cookout. Mostly farmers, they have heard talk about closing the floodway most of their lives and by now will believe it when they see it.

Bill Dunn, one of the members, farms 2,500 acres near the park. He said the flooding this year was the worst he has seen because it came in unusually late and stayed until this month. He expects to lose about 25 percent of his crop.

Big Oak Tree includes 80 acres of virgin forest. A 143-foot-tall burr oak was one of the reasons the forest was preserved in 1938. That tree eventually died at about 350 years of age, but the park still has the state champion burr oak, and 50,000 people visit the park each year. The park had to close in May during the worst of the

Teddy Bennett remembers the sight of his 10-member-family's house floating upside down in the bayou when he was a boy. His brother, Reuben, is all for the project but says, "It would have helped about 1928," he said. "That's when they started this."

It's never too late, he said. "But I don't think it will ever happen."

Pinhook problems

The tiny, primarily black community of Pinhook just east of East Prairie has gotten the worst of the flooding through the years. The town has a population of only 52, but many more who used to live there left because of the constant flooding and the inability to make a living, Robinson says.

He and his wife, Aretha, have lived in the area for about half a century.



"It was one of the few places African-Americans were allowed to buy land. It was an unwritten law."

— Jim Robinson, Pinhook, Mo., farmer

of the few places African-Americans were allowed to buy land. It was an unwritten law."

Moving has never occurred to the Robinsons. "You don't have anywhere else to go," she says. "This is home for us."

In June, Robinson testified in favor of the project before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

"I deserve a place to live and a

place to raise my family," he says. "That's all we're asking for."

"... Hopefully, I can live to see this done," Robinson said.

Earth Island Institute, the Sierra Club, Environmental Defense, the Four Seasons Audubon Society, the Mississippi Valley Chapter of the Ozark Society and the Missouri Coalition for the Environment are some of the groups opposed to the project.

"It's a very bad idea," says Ted Heisel of the St. Louis-based Missouri Coalition for the Environment. "It's going to destroy thousands of acres of wetlands and floodplain land that is increasingly rare in the state of Missouri."

The 2,000-member group and others claim that the flooding can be controlled around East Prairie, Mo., and other communities by protecting them with a levee, an option they say is more friendly to the environment and would cost much less. "This is a case of government pork," Heisel said.

St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway is listed at No. 19 on the National Wildlife Federation's list of the corps' most environmentally harmful and financially wasteful projects.

Endangered animals

Dr. Bill Eddleman, a biology professor at Southeast Missouri State University who is president of the Four Seasons Audubon Society, said least terns, an endangered species that now come into the backwaters to forage, would be adversely affected by the project. A scientist at Southern Illinois University claims the project would wipe out a whole species of white bass.

To the wildlife that depend on the floodway, closing it off from the river could have devastating ecological effects that most people might not be aware of, Eddleman said.

"To a lot of people in the general public, it's just water."

The corps has added a number of mitigation projects to the plan to answer some of the environmental concerns, including reforestation of 8,375 acres of cropland. Buffer strips up to 100 feet wide along 64 miles of stream and channels in the floodway will be cultivated.



Southeast Missourian photos/Christine Johnson

New Madrid city administrator Furg Hunter pointed to the area on a map where the two levees would be connected if the proposed St. Johns Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project is approved. Hunter supports the project, saying that closing the area to backwater from the Mississippi River will benefit the people and farms in the area.



Aretha Robinson, a supporter of the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway project, cut corn at her kitchen table while visiting family and friends Thursday just west of Pinhook, a small village of 52 people located southeast of East Prairie. Robinson has been a resident of the area for 46 years.

ed, along with a planted corridor between Big Oak Tree State Park and Ten Mile Pond Wildlife Conservation Area.

The project will benefit many communities in the region, New Madrid city administrator Ferguson Hunter says. "It cuts across a wide spectrum."

He is on the board of the St. Johns Levee and Drainage District, which is the sponsoring agency for the project.

Martha Ellen Black, executive director of the East Prairie Enterprise Community, says the project is essential to the people who live in the community, many of whom work in New Madrid and in Sikeston, Mo. "It's a little hard, if you're flooded, to get to your job. If the streets are flooded and the road is flooded, you can't function."

The city of 3,227 floods because it is wedged between the back flooding from the Mississippi and the water that comes down from Crowley's Ridge to the west, Black says.

Black's organization, sponsored by the Susanna Wesley Family Learning Center, sponsors various programs aimed at building healthy families.

"We're a farming economy," she says. "When the farmer's don't do well, we don't do well."